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So Long to Cheap Books You Could Fit in Your Pocket

The mass market paperback, light in the hand and on the wallet, once filled airport bookstores and supermarket media aisles. You may never buy a new one again.

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By Elizabeth A. Harris

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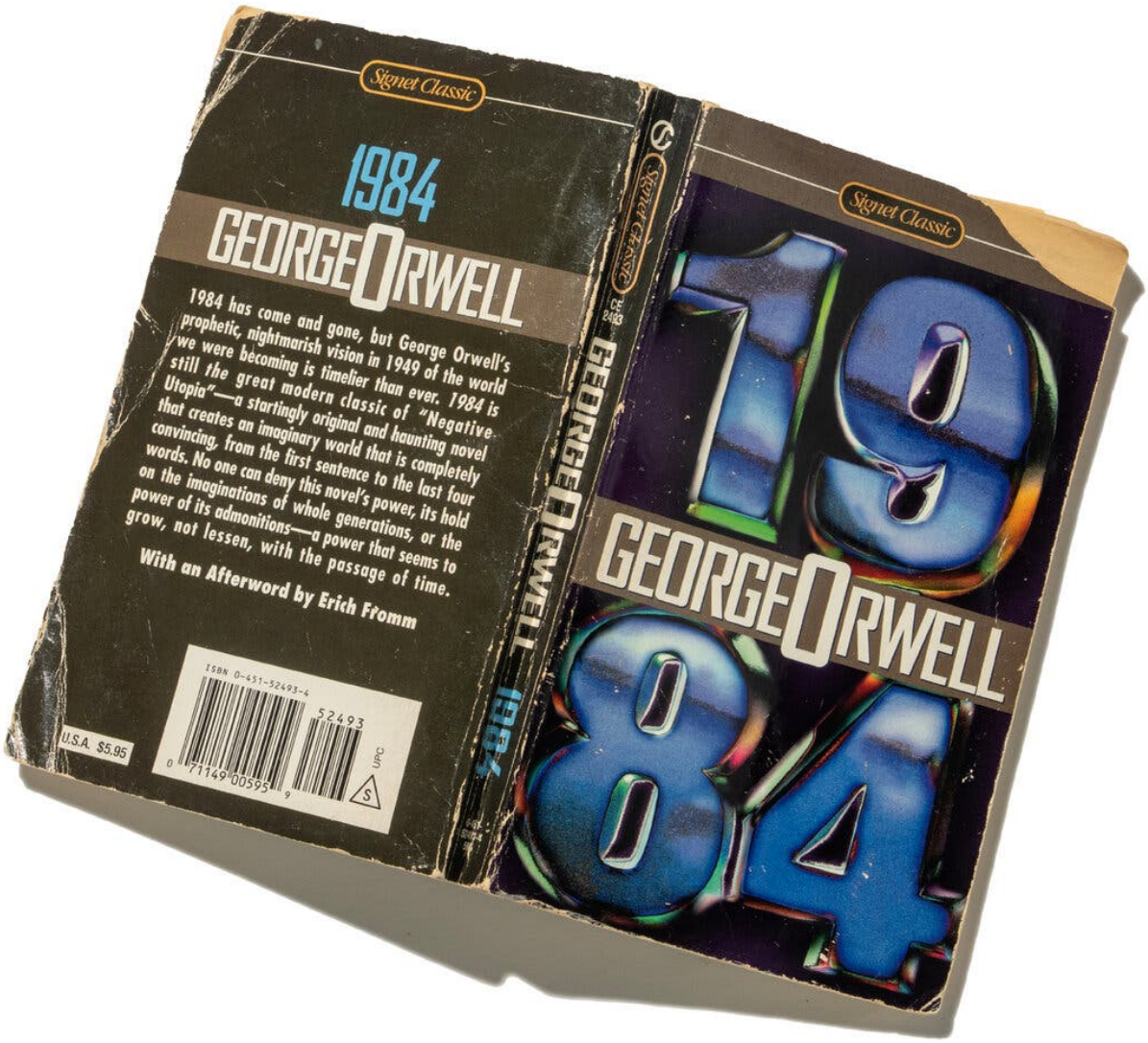
When the first book in the Bridgerton series was published in 2000, it was immediately recognizable as a romance novel. The cover was pink and purple, with a looping font, and like most romances at the time, it was printed as a mass market paperback. Short, squat and printed on flimsy paper with narrow margins, it was the kind of book you'd find on wire racks in grocery stores or airports and buy for a few bucks.

Those racks have all but disappeared.

After almost a century in wide circulation, the mass market paperback is shuffling toward extinction. Sales have dropped for years, peeled away by e-books, digital audiobooks and even more expensive formats like hardcovers and trade paperbacks, the mass market's larger and pricier cousin. Last year, ReaderLink — the country's largest distributor of books to airport bookshops, pharmacies and big-box stores like Target and Walmart — announced that it would stop carrying mass markets altogether.

“You can still find them in some places,” said Ivan Held, the president of Putnam, Dutton and Berkley, publishing imprints that once did brisk business in mass markets. “But as a format, I would say it’s pretty much over.”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Paula Rabinowitz, the author of a cultural history of paperbacks called “American Pulp,” traces the “creation myth” of the modern paperback industry to the mid-1930s, when an English book editor named Allen Lane was so displeased with the reading options available to him at an Exeter train station that he committed himself to making better stories widely available. He went on to publish compact, smartly branded

paperbacks and sell them in chain stores and tobacco shops for no more than a pack of cigarettes.

“It was one of the most brilliant technologies in the history of the world,” Rabinowitz said, “precisely because you could shove it in your purse or your pocket.”

Such low prices required inexpensive production. Because mass market spines were glued together instead of sewn, the covers often came off, or pages fell out. Libraries rarely bought them, in part because they were too fragile.

But they were plenty popular elsewhere. By 1939, the paperbacks put out by Lane’s new venture, Penguin Books, had reached the United States. Mass markets from Penguin and other publishers, like Pocket Books, were soon available for 25 cents in supermarkets and train stations, brought there by the same companies that distributed magazines and candy bars.

“There were, say, a few hundred book stores in the United States, but there were thousands of little drugstores and bus stations and so on in small towns,” Rabinowitz said. “That’s why they’re called mass market. There was a much more robust system for getting these books out there.”

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

During World War II, the American government distributed specially made paperbacks to soldiers, who couldn't very well listen to the radio while sitting in fox holes, Rabinowitz said. The books were printed horizontally, to get more words on each page, and fit in the pockets of G.I. uniforms.

After the war, books and weapons were the only wartime supplies the armed services required soldiers to return. Publishers feared that otherwise, millions of free paperbacks would flood the American market, devastating their businesses. The books were often dumped in countries where Americans had fought before the soldiers headed

home.

In the middle of the 20th century, mass markets — or "pulps," as cheap paperbacks were called then — regularly sported covers we might now call "spicy," featuring a woman taking off an article of clothing. Many of these books were westerns, thrillers or self-help titles, and there were even popular gay and lesbian pulps available. Publishers that put out classics as mass markets would generally give those racy covers, too.

For decades, mass markets sold in enormous quantities. A genuine hit could, as the Beatles famously put it, "make a million for you overnight." Successful hardcovers might sell in the tens of thousands, while a mass market hit could sell a hundred times that.

Stephen King, a famous paperback writer himself, said he grew up buying 35 cent mass markets at the drugstore and was sad to see them go the way of the VHS tape. As a young man, he bought every paperback novel by the thriller writer John D. MacDonald he could get his hands on — and sometimes books with "beautiful babes" on the cover.

Paperbacks were what King could afford, and it was "paperback money," he said, that allowed him to quit his teaching job and write full time. When the New American Library bought the paperback rights to his 1974 debut novel, "Carrie," it paid $400,000.

"We lived off that money," King said. "I could write books. I was free."

In the 1990s, with sales of mass markets beginning to sag, new technologies came along that were more portable than print books — and often even cheaper. After digital books were introduced to the public, publishers worried they would all but replace the print book.

That hasn't happened. Physical books still account for about 75 percent

of book sales, according to the Association of American Publishers. But mass market paperbacks have been a casualty.

According to Circana BookScan, which tracks most print book sales in the United States, about 103 million mass markets were sold in 2006, the year before the Kindle was introduced. Last year, readers bought fewer than 18 million of them.

Over the past decade, the number of mass market titles publishers made available in the United States dropped as well, but not nearly so sharply, falling to about 44,000 from 54,000. It wasn't publishers leading the move away from mass markets. It was readers.

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

E-books converted many mass market stalwarts. Devoted romance readers, for instance, who often devour multiple books every week, used to buy mass markets by the bundle. Those readers were among the first to move to e-readers, which can store thousands of e-books at a time — many of which are sold for even less than mass markets.

Mass markets were not just cannibalized digitally. Readers now seem more willing to buy books in larger, pricier formats like trade paperbacks and hardcovers. And romance readers happily shell out three or four times the price of a mass market on deluxe hardcovers with colorfully stained edges on the paper or other embellishments.

“We follow the consumer,” said Dennis Abboud, the chief executive of ReaderLink. “In the case of mass markets, the consumer spoke. They were just done with it.”

Not every mass market title is going away quite yet. Classics like “To Kill a Mockingbird,” “Catcher in the Rye” and “1984,” for example, are still sold to schools as mass markets because they’re so inexpensive. Vintage, a publishing imprint, said it shipped more than 210,000 mass market copies of “A Raisin in the Sun” in 2025 — a huge number for a book.

The format also remains of interest to bibliophiles. The Strand bookstore in New York City sells thousands of copies of used mass markets every year, said June Amelia, a used-book buyer at the store, with collectors and resellers sometimes spending hundreds of dollars on them.

Still, the format makes less and less financial sense. There is only about a 30 cent difference, Abboud said, between producing a mass market and a trade paperback of the same title — but the trade version could easily sell for $6 more.

Tony Cenicola/The New York Times

Hudson, a retail chain, operates more than 1,000 stores in transportation hubs across North America. Long a stalwart seller of mass markets alongside gum, newspapers and travel pillows, the chain began phasing them out of its convenience stores several years ago and stopped carrying them there altogether in 2025. Sara Hinckley, who leads the North American books and media business for Hudson's parent company, Avolta, said Hudson's dedicated bookstore locations now have small selections of mass markets, and that's it.

Even the Bridgerton books are no longer printed as mass markets.

After bookstores run out of their stock, it won't be replenished — but you can still buy them in trade paperback and hardcover.

Landon DeLille, an 18-year-old in Converse sneakers and blue jeans, browsed a bin of used paperbacks at the Strand while visiting New York last month. "If it weren't for these, I reckon I might not have gotten into reading what I do," he said.

DeLille plucked a mass market copy of "Those About to Die," by Daniel P. Mannix, from the bin, its pages yellowed with age. The original price, printed on the cover, was 35 cents.

"This one is from 1958, and it's about gladiators," DeLille said. "That's cool."

DeLille didn't wind up buying it. Instead, he brought home a story collection called "A Letter to Harvey Milk," signed by its author, Lesléa Newman.

The book was a trade paperback.

Alexandra Alter contributed reporting.

Elizabeth A. Harris covers books and the publishing industry, reporting on industry news and examining the broader cultural impact of books. She is also an author.